

Otto Appert: 1930–2012

On 29 May 2012 Father Otto Appert died in Ruswill, Switzerland, at the age of 82. He was born on 31 August 1930 and was the last of nine children. After studying in Nuolen and Werthenstein, Switzerland, he was ordained as a priest before being sent to Madagascar in 1959, where his main responsibilities were to conduct pastoral work in the Diocese of Morombe, Toliara, and paleontological research. During the next seven years, Father Appert collected much fossil material before returning to his native Switzerland. Between 1966 and 1973 he published on his paleontological findings, work still considered an outstanding contribution to Late Palaeozoic and Mesozoic paleobotany. His final publication in paleobotany appeared when he was 77 years old (Barale & Appert 2007). In 2004 Appert received the Amanz Gressly Prize from the Paleontological Society of Switzerland for his remarkable contributions to paleobotany.

In 1973–90 Appert returned to Morombe and spent significant time further north in Manja, Toliara, where he continued collecting paleontological material, as well as being involved in botanical and ornithological work. Shortly after arriving in Madagascar in 1959, Appert started making observations on the region's birds. He rapidly focused on the breeding biology of endemic birds at the Mangoky Delta (Appert 1966a,b, 1967, 1968a,b,c,d) and more broadly in the area located between Toliara and Morombe. This research, published in the 1960s and 1970s, still forms an important base on the birds of western Madagascar. He described many important aspects of the natural history of endemics such as Madagascar Crested Ibis *Lophotibis cristata* (Appert 1966a), Long-tailed Ground Roller *Uratelornis chimaera* (Appert 1968b), Madagascar Cuckoo-Roller *Leptosomus discolor* (Appert 1968a), Bensch's Mesite *Monias benschi* (Appert 1968c), couas (*Coua* spp.) (Appert 1966b, 1967, 1970a, 1980) and vangas (Vangidae) (Appert 1968d, 1970b). These publications remain primary references in modern Malagasy ornithology. He also discovered a new species



Father Otto Appert (Olivier Langrand)

in Zombitse forest, near Sakaraha, which was described in the early 1970s (Colston 1972) and named after him, Appert's Tetraka *Xanthomixis apperti* (originally in the genus *Phyllastrephus*).

Appert also published on migrants such as flamingos and shorebirds that were not known or poorly assessed with respect to their presence on the island. He continued to publish regularly in the 1980s and 1990s including on endemics such as the genus *Newtonia* (Appert 1997), *Tylas eduardi* and Bensch's Mesite (e.g., Appert 1985).

Most of his ornithological work, >25 publications, was published in German in *Journal für Ornithologie* or *Der Ornithologischer Beobachter*, although a few were in French. He pioneered the inclusion of bird photographs in articles (Appert 1966a,b, 1967, 1968a,b,e, 1980), providing an important visual element of species that in

some cases had not been previously illustrated and were largely unknown to scientists. He was always very precise in his reports, which made his publications even more valuable at a time when information Madagascar's birds was limited as very few observers worked the country during the socialist Second Republic from 1975 to 1992.

I was privileged to meet Appert several times, first in Madagascar during the 12 years I spent there between 1980 and 1996, but also in Switzerland in 1992, where he was recovering from health problems. He always welcomed the opportunity to discuss bird matters, sharing his experience and ideas in his faint voice and his rolling accent as we conversed in French. Appert worked independently, regularly publishing papers as a sole author, only three times as or with a co-author, to high scientific standards. His name will remain attached to a few species of the flora and the fauna of Madagascar: in addition to Appert's Tetraka, a snake has been named for him (*Liophidium apperti*) (Domergue 1984), as well as two plants, an aquatic plant (*Appertiella hexandra*) (Cook & Triest 1982) and a croton (*Croton appertii*) (Leandri 1976).

Father Appert leaves a large collection of publications, the last, on the breeding biology of birds in the Mangoky region, published when he was 81 years old (Appert 2011), which will continue to capture the interest of scientists and students intrigued by Madagascar and the island's unique biodiversity, and indirectly will contribute to its protection.

Olivier Langrand

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